

University of Groningen

## The Medium-Sensitive Experience and the Paradigmatic Experience of the Grotesque, 'Unnatural', or 'Monstrous'

van den Oever, A. M. A.

*Published in:*  
Leonardo

*DOI:*  
[10.1162/LEON\\_a\\_00495](https://doi.org/10.1162/LEON_a_00495)

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2013

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

van den Oever, A. M. A. (2013). The Medium-Sensitive Experience and the Paradigmatic Experience of the Grotesque, 'Unnatural', or 'Monstrous'. *Leonardo*, 46(1), 88-89. [https://doi.org/10.1162/LEON\\_a\\_00495](https://doi.org/10.1162/LEON_a_00495)

**Copyright**

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

**Take-down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

# THE MEDIUM-SENSITIVE EXPERIENCE AND THE PARADIGMATIC EXPERIENCE OF THE GROTESQUE, "UNNATURAL" OR "MONSTROUS"

A.M.A. van den Oever, Department of Arts, Culture, and Media, University of Groningen, P.O. Box 716, 9700 AS Groningen, The Netherlands. E-mail: <A.M.A.van.den.Oever1@rug.nl>.

See <www.mitpressjournals.org/toc/leon/46/1> for supplemental files associated with this issue.

Submitted: 9 June 2011

## Abstract

To create the conceptual space to analyze the evident and structural similarities between the art experience, the (new) media experience, and the media art experience, the author approaches the "medium" as "techniques" which "make [the seen] strange." A disruption of the perceptual process, a destabilization of the cognitive routines, a sudden sensitivity to the medium and an instant emotional response are at the heart of these (art) experiences. The author argues that the (well-studied) experience of the grotesque provides a model for the analysis of these (understudied) medium-sensitive experiences of the "strange" or "unnatural," for which the grotesque experience is emblematic.

**Key words:** art experience, new media experience, media art experience, medium-sensitive experience, grotesque experience, perceptual process, cognitive routines, (de)automatization, (de)stabilization, (de)naturalization, (de)sensitization, aesthetic category, embodied cognitions.

In his contribution to an anthology on the grotesque from 2003, Noël Carroll wrote that from "a merely statistic point of view, the grotesque is one of the leading forms of mass art today. [...] [T]he grotesque seems omnipresent. Thus it appears timely to address it theoretically."<sup>1</sup> Carroll's approach of the grotesque is interesting in many ways. He analyzes Homer Simpson, Edward Scissorhands, self portraits by Cindy Sherman and other "grotesques" (see a Renaissance example in Fig. 1) as "structurally similar in that they all mix distinct biological and ontological categories."<sup>2</sup> As such, they "elicit certain affective states, namely, horror, comic amusement, and awe."<sup>3</sup> Carroll also argues that "these emotional responses have interesting family relations with each other and with the core structure of the grotesque."<sup>4</sup> Pivotal is the subversion of "our categorical expectations concerning the natural and ontological order."<sup>5</sup> To this we strongly respond: the categories of our understanding suddenly and momentarily fail, as Wolfgang Kayser rightly stated in his standard work on the grotesque from 1957.<sup>6</sup>

Though Carroll's argument (in line with standard research on the grotesque) is convincing, his explanation for the

current prominence of the grotesque in mainstream culture is less satisfying. He sees a relation with the present "quickly accelerating entertainment industry" (e.g., the demand for an endless variety of new and fantastic grotesque beings, triggering sudden and strong emotions). Yet he overlooks the current period in history as a medium-oriented<sup>7</sup> one, with medium-sensitive viewers with a focus on new optical and digital techniques (e.g., C.G.I. or 3D on an IMAX wide screen). Moreover, he overlooks the perceptual experience of these new techniques – which almost inevitably "grotesquely" distort, fuse, enlarge and/or deform the seen, and thus typically fuse our biological and ontological categories and destabilize our cognitive routines – as a paradigmatic experience of the grotesque. In other words, the experience of the grotesque is not merely or exclusively a perceptual experience of grotesque beings (e.g., fused, enlarged, formless, gigantic beings): it is always, more basically, an experience of the distorting and destabilizing powers of the techniques involved in the perceptual process. Overlooking them (as well as their perceptual impact) is an inherent part of the problem under discussion. This can best be explained in terms of (I) being sensitized, followed by (II) being desensitized to the distorting powers of (new) techniques / media.

## Being Sensitized to Media

I) Being sensitive or sensitized to a medium means, first of all, that new techniques which break the automatic routines of perception by "making [the seen] strange" notably slow down, complicate and deepen the perceptual process, and thus typically create, secondly, a sensitivity to the techniques involved in the process and an "art experience" (a prolonged experience of things "as they are perceived and not as they are known"),<sup>8</sup> as Viktor Shklovsky explained, theorizing on the problem quite brilliantly in that other medium-oriented interval in history, one marked by the "birth" of the cinema. In fact, it was the early cinema experience that sensitized him to the medium and made him theorize on the problem of "deautomatization" in his seminal "Art as Technique." Note that a disruption of the perceptual process, a "deautomatization" of the cognitive routines involved in the process, and an instant emotional response are at the heart of these medium-sensitive

experiences and that medium sensitivity and a prolonged [art] experience of the object may be triggered by all new techniques which have not yet established a stable relation to the perceptual-cognitive routines. Note also that with regard to their destabilizing perceptual potential "technique" (including artistic techniques), "technology," and "medium" may be used as synonyms, as I do here, leaving other questions (e.g., regarding their technical specifics and effectual impact) unaddressed for reasons of conciseness. Note, lastly, that the problem of medium sensitivity underlying Russian Formalist art theory was basically overlooked in the post-war moment of their reintroduction to scholars outside Russia. I mention this here, because overlooking the impact of early cinema on Russian Formalism is in itself an ironic illustration of the fact that the destabilizing effect of new technologies on individuals and culture is indeed easily overlooked once the sensitivity for the technique is lost. Which brings me to my second point.

## Being Desensitized to Media

II) Being desensitized to a medium means that the sensitivity to the medium vanishes as the "strangeness effects" wear off due to the mechanisms of "habituation," "automatization" or "algebraization."<sup>9</sup> This inevitably leads to a decrease of sensitivity to the distorting powers of these once new techniques, to the verge of percepts becoming almost fully insensitive to them. It automatically leads to a point where the presence of techniques in the perceptual process is not noted anymore: a swift shift from medium to mediated may become not only habitual, but even natural or "second nature." Being perceived as "natural" indicates that, once the mechanisms of automatization enhance a smooth, swift and quick shift in the perceptual process from perceptual input to cognition, fully automatic and unnoticed by the percepts, they may altogether stop to take note of the ontological difference between a tree or cockroach in nature and one on a canvas, photo, TV, laptop or IMAX wide screen. It is for this very reason that the special ontological status of the image as "mediated" may automatically be overlooked and may well go unquestioned. This is in itself an interesting symptom of percepts being (fully) desensitized to a medium (e.g., television): it easily leads to an (almost

full) identification of real and mediated. In other words, overlooking the medium is a predictable and almost inevitable consequence of the process of automatization: once techniques become second nature, we lose sight of them. Everyday percipients may find this adequate, as automatization enhances action as needed in everyday life. Researchers, however, may argue that research does not necessarily benefit from quick shifts from input to cognition, and that automatization facilitates a “dormative”<sup>10</sup> use of an ambiguous<sup>11</sup> and under-researched and basically primitive, magical or mythical notion of “form.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, they might argue that automatization facilitates a dominant research focus on the “real,” not on the medium. This may be referred to as the realist fallacy in research: desensitized to its effects, realists basically leave the media effects and the medium-sensitive experience understudied. In light of the above one must conclude that overlooking the medium is a fundamental and structural phenomenon, also in the field of research, and that automatization is the mechanism underlying the phenomenon. A second phenomenon which should be mentioned here is what I would refer to as the modernist fallacy. Some artists and artist-researchers, sensitized by new media (e.g., avant-gardists; new media enthusiasts), do not overlook the medium’s impact but tend to take the disruptive effects of new techniques to be “auretic” (to use Benjamin’s words): powerful and highly appreciated evocative effects which are then framed in research as artistic techniques, purposefully used and shaped as part of an art work. Yet I would argue that the really interesting phenomenon with regard to (new media and) medium sensitivity - which should make researchers want to reconsider the problem altogether - is that all new techniques working on the senses evidently possess a destabilizing potential, which easily materializes and becomes manifest, inside or outside artistic practices: new techniques notably “distort” the seen or heard, thus also typically triggering a discourse on the “new” as a confrontation with the “distorted” or “unnatural,” as discourses over time have testified – which brings me back to the grotesque. Memorable examples are to be found in art history and the history of the cinema, including the recent IMAX cinema experiences of a (computer generated) close-up of an

Avatar on a wide screen of 200 square meters: such technical novelties in their moment of introduction, easily create a confrontational experience with something distinctly “unnatural,” “grotesque,” and “monstrous,” as is stressed in discourses under these terms.<sup>13</sup> Phenomena like these not only point in the direction of the existence of (embodied) cognitions of natural proportions,<sup>14</sup> but also clearly indicate that the perceptual-cognitive system is highly sensitive to the distorting powers of new (optical) techniques, as they destabilize the cognitive routines instantly and notably, yet only momentarily, as the destabilizing effects will be smoothed away over time in the process of automatization. Interestingly, this suggests that the twin mechanisms of deautomatization and automatization are constitutive of the fields of art and media respectively, and that the two are inherently connected.

### Findings

In addition to the standard works on the grotesque, I would argue that the very experience of the destabilization of the perceptual-cognitive routines by the use of new techniques creating a distinct experience of distortion of the natural order is constitutive of the category of the grotesque understood as an aesthetic category (Kayser, Kant). This should remind us that an aesthetic category is not merely or in the first place a class of objects (frescoes, paintings, pictures, statues, collages) produced in the course of history, but rather a class of aesthetic experiences. It should also remind us that the existence of this experiential category points in the direction of a highly sensitive cognitive “apparatus,” which clearly signals the use of new techniques: by marking the seen/heard as “unnatural.” Lastly, this should remind us that the relatively short intervals in history in which the grotesque bloomed<sup>15</sup> need to be reconceptualized as medium-sensitive intervals in history, which typically destabilize the ontological stability of mimetic tradition and produce new art, new insights and a new episteme in their wake.

I cordially thank Ed Tan for his comments on my article.

### References and Notes

1. Noël Carroll, “The Grotesque Today,” in Frances S. Connelly, ed., *Modern Art and the Grotesque* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) pp. 293-294.



**Fig. 1. “Grotesques” in *The Galleria delle Carte Geografiche* in the Vatican Palace. (Photo © Sophie Scholtens / Annie van den Oever)**

2. Carroll [1] p. 296.
3. Carroll [1] p. 298.
4. Carroll [1] p. 298.
5. Carroll [1] p. 298.
6. Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957).
7. See Annie van den Oever, ed. *Ostrannenie* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010) pp. 34-40, 72-79.
8. Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” in *Russian Formalist Criticism. Four Essays*, Lee T. Lemon, and Marion J. Reis, trans. (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965) p. 5.
9. Shklovsky: “If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. Thus, for example, all of our habits retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic [...]. The process of ‘algebraization,’ the over-automatization of [the routines of perception of] an object, permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort. Either objects are assigned only one proper feature—a number, for example—or else they function as though by formula and do not even appear in cognition.” Shklovsky [8] pp.11-12.
10. One may argue that automatization puts the critical function in researchers to sleep. On “conceptual fog” and its “dormative” function, see: Gregory Bateson’s Introduction to his *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
11. Understood as mediated / real (not mediated) at the same time.
12. See Carroll [1] who speaks of “beings,” “forms,” “representations” and “images” synonymously.
13. On the destabilizing introduction of technological novelties – see *Ostrannenie* [7] pp. 194-199.
14. See Francesca Garbarini and Mauro Adenzato, “At the Root of Embodied Cognition: Cognitive Science Meets Neuropsychology,” *Brain and Cognition* 56 (2004) pp. 102-103.
15. Renaissance, romanticism, early and late 20th century – see Kayser [6].